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Protesters urge hasty cleanup at abandoned chemical plant

Neighbors of former chemical truck cleaning facility call for end to pollution



Image 1 out of 5

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August 10, 2014 |
Updated: August 11,
2014 10:56am

Residents
from a modest
southeast
Houston
neighborhood
pointed
Sunday
toward a
lagoon of
algae-
covered water

Johnny Hanson/Staff

About 25 residents and members of the Texas Organizing Project rallied for more cleanup at the shuttered CES Environmental Services.

with a pungent chemical smell that filled the parking lot of an abandoned cleaning facility for chemical trucks. Only some weeds and a cyclone fence separate the facility from homes and a charter school.

CES Environmental Services Inc. at 4904 Griggs Road, a shuttered company that once generated as much as \$8 million a year in revenue, filed for bankruptcy and shut its doors in 2010 after paying millions to resolve residential complaints and

safety violations that caused explosions and allegedly killed a worker there, records show.

Today, a rusty "for sale" sign is staked in front of the dilapidated 8-acre facility, but what worries nearby residents is that a heavy downpour two weeks ago washed some of that stagnant pool down their streets and into their yards. A dirty pool still remained Sunday, despite days of scorching heat since the rain.

"The wastewater left a brown stain on my street. Some city employees came and took samples of the residue. We're supposed to get the results Monday," said Roselyn Johnson, who helped organize Sunday's protest. "That wastewater smelled horrible."

Johnson, who's disabled and suffers from a breathing disorder, chronic obstruction pulmonary disease, was joined by about 25 neighborhood protestors, many donning surgical masks and loudly chanting "Clean it up!"

Mary Moreno, spokeswoman for Texas Organizing Project that lent support to the low-income neighborhood, said, "Something like this would not happen in affluent areas like River Oaks. This is a classic case of environmental racism."

The truck-cleaning facility was built right up against homes in the South Union subdivision, within about a block of Houston's Hartsfield Elementary and a stone's throw from the Beatrice Mayes Institute charter school.

Residents said the site is now under the control of a bankruptcy trustee and that vacuum trucks were sent after the deluge to suck up some of the wastewater. Bulldozers were also used to form a makeshift dirt dike in an effort to contain any potential contaminants, but Moreno said residents want "more than just a Band-Aid."

Texas Commission on Environmental Quality spokesman Terry Clawson said his agency has been working with the bankruptcy trustee and Environmental Protection Agency to try to stabilise the site.

The bankruptcy trustee will address whether any contaminants still linger there, he said.

The former CEO of the facility, Matthew Bowman, could not be reached for comment.

Bowman has been embroiled in legal troubles with a number of facilities that he operated, including Port Arthur Environmental Services. He pleaded guilty in 2013 for occupational safety violations that killed an employee there. He was accused of mislabeling and illegally transporting chemicals there and was ordered to pay a fine and serve a year in prison.

During the 10 years the CES facility was in operation, Houston officials received more than 200 complaints about sickening odors wafting into the surrounding neighborhood. CES cleaned tanker trucks for refineries and chemical plants along the Houston Ship Channel, recycling oil and packaging waste for disposal.

Neighborhood residents now worry about leftover residue and how the state will secure the old discarded barrels and storage containers.

"I don't feel we should have to inhale this stuff," said Bobby Wyatt, another resident living near the site.

Jack Cunningham, a fast-food worker who rents a home across from the site, corralled his 2-year-old, saying he's afraid to let children play in his grassy front yard.

"Last week, when it rained, the smell made me nauseous," he added.

A 75-year-old retired housekeeper, Ray Whitmire, whose home shares a fence line with the facility, said he joined a class-action lawsuit against the facility. He said he received \$5,000 about 2 1/2 years ago.

"They also promised that they were going to clean it up. But I still smell it all the time," Whitmire said, adding that many of his former neighbors have died of cancer and he wonders if there's a connection to the facility.

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